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Turkish heritage families in Sweden: language practices and family language policy

Ute Bohnacker

Department of Linguistics & Philology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper explores family language policy in Turkish-speaking families in Sweden. Questionnaires were administered to the parents of 105 Turkish/Swedish children (age 4–7), targeting family language practices (including parent–parent, parent–child, child–parent, child-and-sibling conversation and language-fostering activities such as joint book reading, storytelling and mother tongue tuition), and parental language beliefs and attitudes. Despite much diversity in family types concerning parents’ education, country of birth, native language and ethnic affiliation (e.g. Kurdish), common traits emerge: There is a strong focus on the transmission of Turkish in the home, in the face of early and extensive Swedish pre-school attendance. Parents mostly speak Turkish with the child. However, Sweden-born parents report higher uses of Swedish in the home, and sibling interaction also drives a shift towards Swedish. Parental education appears to affect Turkish joint reading activities. Most parents consider proficiency in Turkish and Swedish as equally important for their children. Parents who rank Turkish higher do not necessarily show more maintenance efforts, pointing to some inconsistency between attitudes and practices. Overall, the family language practices observed indicate strong bilingual ideologies and strong language maintenance ideologies, in line with Swedish official state-level language policy, which supports bilingualism and minority language maintenance.

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Introduction
This paper investigates the language practices of Turkish-heritage families with 4-to-7-year-old children in Sweden.

The home is generally regarded as the hub for minority language maintenance and development, and language transmission is greatly dependent on the interaction between family members. Parents are key agents here (Lanza 1997), but parental choices alone will not guarantee the upkeep of a minority language in the family, as the parents and child do not exist in a vacuum. Sooner or later, the child will enter childcare services and formal schooling in the majority language, and the educational system, as well as the child’s peer group, plays an important role in shaping children’s language use. Family language practices concerning minority language maintenance may stem from deliberate management efforts, but they often also evolve in ways that are not consciously planned, since frequently social pressures intervene and change the dynamics of family life (Caldas 2012).
Even when parents strongly advocate the upkeep of the minority language, children will bring the majority language into the home, use it and invite conversations and more input in it (Hoff et al. 2014; Pearson 2007; Prevoo et al. 2011). Siblings are also key agents, as they tend to interact to a greater extent in the majority language and thereby promote language shift (Barron-Hauwaert 2011; Bridges and Hoff 2014; Paradis et al. 2020; Rojas et al. 2016; Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2018). By contrast, grandparents and other relatives are often seen as agents promoting heritage language upkeep.

Family language practices that ‘just happen’, as well as parents’ more deliberate planning efforts, have recently been subsumed under the term ‘family language policy’ (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry 2008; Lanza and Lomeu Gomes 2020; Schwartz 2010). Parents may make deliberate language management efforts intended to boost minority language exposure and interaction in the home, such as consistently choosing to communicate with their child in that language, promoting minority language media, literacy, singing and/or joint (picture/story) book reading activities and other joyful family cultural activities strongly associated with the minority language (Schwartz 2010). Parents may also try to influence their children’s external environment, for instance, by enrolment in bilingual schools, heritage language playgroups or extracurricular activities, mother tongue tuition (MTT) classes or seeing to it that the child keeps close contact with minority language relatives and friends.

However, such language management efforts are not simply a matter of parental choice. Bilingual education or MTT might not be easily available, and/or the family may not have the resources to be able to afford books, language tuition, travel, or to spend much time with the child, having to work long hours outside the home to support the family.

Moreover, the social, economic and political conditions in the host country and its dominant language ideology will have an impact on family language practices and beliefs. What is the official state-level policy, and how is it implemented in the educational system? Are multilingualism and the maintenance and development of minority languages promoted, tolerated or repressed in mainstream society? Do pre-school staff, teachers and other persons of authority encourage minority language use or not? Family language practices, management efforts and beliefs do not emerge independently and are not isolated from society.

The Swedish context has been said to differ from that of many other Western countries. In a number of rankings, such as the Special Eurobarometer 469 (European Commission Directorate-General for Communication 2018), the Multicultural Policy Index (2021), and the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Solano and Huddleston 2020), Sweden regularly comes out tops concerning public support for minority languages in education, state integration policies, and multiculturally oriented politics (see also Aktürk-Drake 2018). Institutional childcare is comprehensive and accessible from an early age in Sweden, irrespective of parental background or income. Whilst Swedish is the default medium of (pre)school instruction, the legislation promotes the upkeep and development of home languages other than Swedish (Education Act 2010, Language Act 2009), and the educational system is expected to implement this policy. For instance, preschoolers and pupils are entitled to MTT classes (although there have been recent cuts in offerings). Apart from beneficial effects for the development of cultural identity, it is assumed that a good command of the home/minority language will help the acquisition of the majority language Swedish (Cummins 1979).

How such state-level policy might affect the language beliefs and management efforts of heritage language speakers in Sweden is unknown. This paper attempts to shed light on the family language policies of one such group, Turkish-speaking families with pre-school and young school-age children, by investigating their language practices via a questionnaire-based survey. The findings are discussed in light of Sweden’s dominant language ideology. The paper contributes a Swedish perspective to this Special Issue, where family language practices of Turkish-heritage families in different countries are studied and discussed in relation to state integration policies.
For better contextualisation, Section 2 provides some sociolinguistic background on the Turkish-speaking community in Sweden. Section 3 describes the methods, participants and findings of the empirical study, characterising family language practices, heritage language management efforts, and parental beliefs and attitudes. Section 4 contains a discussion and a conclusion.

The Turkish-speaking population in Sweden

Turkish heritage speakers in Sweden constitute a sizeable minority, but are far from the largest immigrant minority in the country. As Swedish authorities are prohibited from collecting census data regarding ethnicity and speakers of a certain language, the exact number of Turkish speakers is unknown; our own estimate, based on Statistics Sweden (2017), is that there are ca 100,000 Turkish speakers, making up around 1% of Sweden’s 10-million population.2

Sweden has seen considerable immigration from Turkey since the mid-1960s when the first labour migrants began to arrive from the town of Kulu in the Konya district of Central Anatolia, recruited by the Swedish Employment Agency (Lundberg 1991; Svanberg 1988). This led to chain migration: continued immigration of mainly unskilled labour (until labour migration was severely restricted in the early 1970s), and family reunification, as immigrants brought their spouses and children. After the 1971 military intervention and the 1980 military coup d’état, there was an additional influx of political refugees from Turkey. They tended to come from large cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara or Diyarbakur, were often well-educated and often belonged to ethnic minorities, especially Kurds (Alpay 1980; Levin and BaŞer 2017; Svanberg 1988), but also Assyrians/Syriacs. Since the 1990s, family reunification or family formation has been the main reason for migration from Turkey to Sweden, as attested in the high numbers of residence permits granted to relatives and marriage partners by the Swedish Migration Agency. Since the 2010s, there has also been an increase in incoming Turkish students and especially Turkish professionals with work permits. Sweden has issued 1000 – 3000 new residence permits every year to Turkish citizens since 1998 (Swedish Migration Agency 2017), which indicates that there is a steady influx of new arrivals from Turkey, most of them likely to be speakers of Turkish. The overwhelming majority of immigrants from Turkey stay in Sweden for good. Most of them also become Swedish citizens, either by adopting dual nationality (which became possible in 1991) or Swedish nationality only.3

Turkey-born immigrants and their descendants are highly urbanised. The majority of them live in Sweden’s largest cities: in the metropolitan region of Greater Stockholm (and surrounding municipalities), Gothenburg on the west coast, and Malmö in the south. Sweden has large segregated housing areas, with predominantly Swedish and predominantly multilingual, multi-ethnic urban areas. Yet there are no predominantly Turkish residential areas, in contrast to West European cities with distinct Turkish-dominant quarters (e.g. Berlin-Kreuzberg). Turkish organisations, mosques and religious establishments also seem to play a less prominent role in Sweden than in other European countries.

Many Turkish-speaking children attend (pre)schools in their local neighbourhood with a high proportion of pupils with a non-Swedish background. Whether such segregated schooling has a negative impact on educational outcomes is unclear. Whilst the grown up descendants of immigrants from Turkey in a large-scale 2008 survey had lower-than-average levels of education (Behtoui 2013, 2146), once age, gender and parents’ educational level were controlled for, descendants of immigrants from Turkey did not differ in their educational achievements from their mainstream Swedish-background peers (Behtoui 2013, 2154).

Several international surveys have investigated urban multilingualism and identity in Turkish speakers in Sweden, including the Multilingual Cities Project, involving school children in Gothenburg (Nygren-Junkin and Extra 2003), and the TIES project (The Integration of the European Second Generation), involving second-generation 18-to-35-year-olds in Stockholm (Westin 2015). Whilst not primarily linguistically oriented, these surveys report a high degree of Turkish
language maintenance in their adult and adolescent second-generation participants (Aktürk-Drake 2017, 2018).

As has been observed for Turkish migrants and their descendants elsewhere (Backus 2004), there is a strong pattern of endogamy, which supports the upkeep and transmission of the home language to the next generation. First-generation migrants mostly set up family with a spouse from the same country of origin. The second generation (Sweden-born, with Turkish roots) often marry and have children with a newcomer from Turkey (‘imported spouse’). Breakdowns by sex, age and type of residence permit (Statistics Sweden 2017; Swedish Migration Agency 2017) indicate that in the Swedish context, the imported spouse is often a 20-to-40-year-old man from Turkey. This may have an impact on family language practices, revitalise the use of Turkish in the home and further transmission to the next generation.

Whilst most speakers of Turkish in Sweden have their family roots in Turkey, far from all self-identify as Turks or consider Turkish to be their mother tongue. Kurdish (Kurmanci) and Syriac (Neo-Aramaic) are proportionally far more strongly represented in Sweden than they are in Turkey, and they also appear to be more strongly represented in Sweden than in other countries with large-scale immigration from Turkey. Westin (2003, 992) and Aras (2015) estimate one third of the Turkish-speaking population of Sweden to be Kurdish. Kurds with their roots in Turkey who are resident in Sweden might speak both Turkish and Kurmanci at home; or they might identify as Kurds but in fact not speak Kurdish well and lack writing skills in Kurdish and therefore primarily speak Turkish or Swedish. Some might re-discover their Kurdish roots and therefore request Kurdish home language education for their children, whilst others prefer to send their children to Turkish classes. Turkish/Kurdish speakers in Sweden are generally avid consumers of Turkish mass media and expose their children to Turkish television channels and other media (Aras 2015). In short, a sizeable group of children growing up with Turkish in Sweden may, in fact, be growing up in a trilingual home environment, which may alter family language policy.

The present study

As part of a larger research project on child bilingualism in Sweden (BiLI-TAS, Bohnacker 2013–2019), we collected data from 105 Turkish–Swedish bilingual children age 4 – 7 and their parents (for details see Bohnacker 2020, Bohnacker et al. 2020, Bohnacker and Karakoç 2020; Öztekin 2019). All children had Turkish as their home language and Swedish as the language of schooling. Whether and to what extent Swedish was spoken at home varied. Most children were bilingual, but some trilinguals participated as well (see below). The families lived in urban areas in central Sweden (the Greater Stockholm area and two nearby larger cities) and were recruited by contacting preschools and schools, municipal MTT teachers, places of worship and community centres, via social media and word of mouth.

The BiLI-TAS project was primarily geared towards investigating the children’s language comprehension and production skills in Turkish and Swedish, so the original aim was not to study family language policy. However, as we administered an extensive questionnaire about family background, language use and child language development to all parents, there is a large amount of data that can shed light on family language practices, and this questionnaire data will be reported here. In addition, a subgroup of the participants were seen again two years later as part of a longitudinal follow-up. Again, the parents filled in a questionnaire. Moreover, the school and home environments were observed, and this time the parents were also systematically interviewed about language practices and home language maintenance efforts. These longitudinal results are not reported here due to space restrictions (but see Bohnacker under review; Öztekin 2019).

The study was carried out in accordance with Swedish legislation on research ethics and data protection and adheres to the Uppsala University ethical code of conduct (Codex), which came into place half-way through the BiLI-TAS research project. Informed parental consent was obtained in writing. Families and children could terminate their participation at any time. The parents filled
in a language and social background questionnaire in Turkish or Swedish, and those who disliked writing were interviewed via telephone in Turkish. The 5-page questionnaire had been developed by the project team for several languages and piloted with Turkish-speaking parents, clinicians, MTT teachers and community members. It contained 36 questions (some yes/no, some estimation scales and some free text questions). Questionnaire data was available for all participants, though in some cases, some questions were left blank. Responses were collated in spreadsheets and anonymised. They form the database for the following sections.

**Background of the participants**

Only families whose children were able to speak both Turkish and Swedish were included in the study. The children were aged 4;0 – 8;2 and distributed roughly evenly across sex and age (27 4-year-olds, 23 5-year-olds, 27 6-year-olds and 28 7-year-olds (including two who had just turned eight years)).

Nearly all children (94%, 99/105) grew up in two-parent households; six lived with single parents. Most children had siblings (92%, 96/105). Nearly all children (90%, 95/105) were born and had lived in Sweden all their lives, only few (10%, 11/105) had moved to Sweden as young children.

By contrast, most parents were born in Turkey. In more than 90% of all cases, both parents were first-generation immigrants from Turkey or one first-generation and one second-generation parent. This confirms the high endogamy rates found in earlier studies. First-generation immigrant parents had moved to Sweden as children or as adults, with residence lengths of 0.6–41 years (mean length: 14 years). 70% (146/210) of the parents had been born in Turkey, 22% had been born in Sweden, 3% had been born in a third country and for 6% this information was missing (also due to single-parent households). Turkey-born parents came from many different regions of Turkey. Only a few children (7%) had two parents who were born in Sweden.

A large majority of parents (70%) reported that Turkish was their native language (L1). For 65% (136/210) Turkish was their only L1, for 2% both Turkish and Swedish were reported as L1s, and for 1% both Turkish and Kurdish. Only 4% reported Swedish as their L1. 19% parents had yet a different L1, in most cases, Kurdish (Kurmanji). For 11% of the parents, L1 information was missing (partly due to single-parent households). Only very few children (8%, 8/105) had a native Swedish-L1 parent; the majority had two Turkish-L1 parents. 19% (20/105) had at least one parent with Kurdish as L1. For 15% (16/105), both parents had another L1 than Turkish (mostly, Kurdish) but stated that Turkish was also spoken in the home on a regular basis. These different language constellations are likely to affect family language practices.

Parental education levels varied. All levels of education were represented, ranging from less than six years of primary education to doctorates. The majority of parents had completed upper secondary school (with 12 – 13 years of schooling), but no tertiary education. Most parents (72%, 152/210) were in paid employment outside the home. Occupations ranged from elementary occupations to senior professionals, but showed a preponderance of service workers, craft workers, clerks and technicians. 5% were unemployed, 4% were students, 9% were housewives and for 11% occupational information was missing.

Not surprisingly considering the parents’ L1, nearly all children, namely 93% (98/105), had been exposed to Turkish continuously from birth. 4% were reported to have been exposed to Kurdish from birth and to Turkish from age 1 to 2, and for 3%, such information was missing. Age of onset for Swedish varied, though 81% (85/105) of the children were exposed regularly to Swedish before age 3;0, typically via pre-school. For 4% this information was missing. For 15% of the children, age of onset for Swedish was after age 3;0; these were mainly Turkey-borns who had immigrated to Sweden with their families.

Estimated current daily exposure to the two languages varied. The majority of the children (66%) had relatively even exposure to both languages (60:40, 50:50, 40:60). 9% were reported to receive at
least 80% of their daily input in Turkish, whereas 21% received 20% or less daily input in Turkish (and 80% or more in Swedish). For the remaining children, information was missing or did not fit these categories.7

6% (6/105) of the children also spoke a third language: Kurdish (Kurmanji), Dimili (Zaza), German and English, but this third language was described as weaker than Turkish or Swedish. Seven other children were exposed to a third language (Kurdish, Bosnian, Persian) from one or both of their parents, but did not speak it themselves. Thus 12% (13/105) grew up in trilingual households.

**Family language practices, management and beliefs**

We explored language use in the home through a number of questions in the questionnaire, including the parents’ language(s) spoken with each other and to the child, the child’s language spoken to the parents and to the siblings and language used between siblings. Parental language use in the home is a reflection of family language policy, whether it is consciously planned or not.

**Parents’ language use and parent–child interaction**

The majority of families reported that both parents spoke (almost) only or mostly Turkish to their child (63%) and to each other (61%). Notably, Turkey-born Turkish-L1 parents (i.e. first-generation parents) spoke almost only Turkish in the home. Some spoke Turkish and another language (often Kurdish) to each other (11%) and to the child (7%). No couples in the sample spoke only/mostly Swedish to their child, and only two couples, both Sweden-born, spoke mostly Swedish to each other (2%).8 The remaining parents spoke both Turkish and Swedish to each other (14%) and to the child (30%); thus, far more parents were speaking at least some Swedish with the child than with each other. Interestingly, parents speaking both Turkish and Swedish with each other were nearly always born in Sweden themselves (i.e. second generation) and had a high level of education.

The majority of children (65%) were reported to speak almost only or mostly Turkish to both parents. Twelve percent children spoke only/mostly Swedish to both their parents; interestingly, but not surprisingly, this only occurred in households where one or both parents had grown up in Sweden. Eighteen percent of the children spoke both Turkish and Swedish to their parents, and the remainder also a third language. Children were thus reported to speak much more Swedish to their parents than vice versa, but still, most of the 4-to-7-year-olds were speaking Turkish to a considerable degree with their parents.

**Siblings and extended family**

Communication between siblings was reported to be only or mostly in Turkish for only 38% of the children, which is very different from parental language use. 45% of the children communicated with their siblings in both Swedish and Turkish, and 16% only/mostly in Swedish.9 This pattern of language use between siblings echoes findings from other contexts (e.g. Bridges and Hoff 2014; Paradis et al. 2020; Rojas et al. 2016; Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2018), where siblings are one of the driving forces behind more extensive majority language use in the home.

We also asked about Turkish exposure via extended family, such as grandparents and other relatives, as these often serve as additional input providers and as advocates of minority language upkeep. The large majority of children (87%) were reported to hear Turkish from extended family, 12% did not. Many of those who did not had parents who had not grown up in Turkey but in Sweden or in a third country and/or whose L1 was not (exclusively) Turkish.

**Specific language-related activities in the home**

The questionnaire also queried specific language-related leisure activities. Parents were asked to fill in how often they did certain activities together with their child, and in which language (never, twice
a month, 1–2 times per week, nearly every day). Such practices can be considered reflections of family language policy.

Most children (77%) were reported to regularly watch Turkish television programmes and films and/or play computer games with their parents, slightly more so than for Swedish. For 64% of the children, parents reported that they regularly sang or listened to Turkish songs with their child (more frequently than in Swedish), and for 59% that they regularly told stories to their child in Turkish (again more frequently than in Swedish). Such culturally embedded activities not only support language development but also associate the language with joyful times spent together. The remaining parents said that they rarely or never carried out such activities or left the answers blank. Whilst there were very few blank answers concerning TV and films, for singing and storytelling in Turkish, blank answers were relatively frequent (around 20%), which could mean that such parent–child activities did not take place.

Joint book reading was queried via two questions. One question asked whether or not the child was exposed to Turkish books in the home, and here only 50% answered yes; however, as many parents left this particular question blank, the results are difficult to interpret. Fortunately, in another part of the questionnaire, parents were asked how often they looked at picture books together with the child or read for the child, and in which language. 66% answered that they did this in Turkish nearly every day or once or twice a week. (Book reading in Swedish was also common.) Joint book reading is known to positively affect linguistic development and may also strengthen parent–child bonding. The frequency of such reading activities varied immensely between families. We tried to find some patterns behind this variability and could observe the following (no statistical tests have been carried out).

When little or no literacy-related language activities with the child were reported (‘never’ or ‘twice a month’), both parents disproportionally often had very low levels of education (only primary school). This was also the case when the answers on these particular questions were left blank, which may indicate that no such activities took place.

We failed to find any different activity patterns for parents with mid-level (secondary school) versus very high education (university graduates). In both groups, there were parents who frequently read storybooks with their children in Turkish, others in Swedish or both—as well as parents who said that they rarely or never did so. We believe that (beyond some functional literacy threshold) it is not the level of education per se, but rather the level of literacy in a particular language that might influence whether parents read for their child or not in Turkish. Quite a few parents in our sample grew up in Sweden and are well-educated but are not necessarily fully literate in Turkish, and might shy away from reading in Turkish. Other parents grew up in Turkey, and may not necessarily be highly educated but they are fully literate in Turkish and therefore read in Turkish their child. Turkish children’s books may also be more or less accessible to families. Whilst public libraries in Sweden provide access to high-quality children’s books free of charge, and they do stock books in many languages, offerings in Turkish are limited. Turkish children’s books would thus need to be purchased by the family, and low-income households may not always have the resources to do so. Apart from cultural capital and financial resources, there are also constraints of time. Some parents worked very long hours, leaving them little time and energy to spend on language-fostering activities, such as book reading, together with their child.

Interestingly, all households with Sweden-born bilingual Turkish/Swedish parents reported that they read Turkish books with the child nearly every day. In these households, Swedish featured prominently in parent–parent, parent–child and child–sibling communication. The extra book reading activities in Turkish may thus be a deliberate attempt to counteract the effects of predominantly Swedish input (at (pre)school and, in part, in the home).

**Enrolment in home language education**

Another deliberate management effort to maintain and develop the heritage language is mother tongue tuition (MTT), as signing up a child for the class is a conscious parental decision. Fifty
four percent of the children in our sample attended Turkish MTT classes. This need not mean that
the remaining 46% of families opted against MTT; it could also mean that the municipality did not
grant their application or did not offer MTT in Turkish. The oldest children attended MTT far more
frequently (age 7: 82%) than the younger children (26%–59%), which most likely reflects recent
cuts in municipal MTT for under 6-year-olds. MTT attendees typically received 40 – 60 min tuition
per week, ranging from 30 min to an exceptional 3.5 h (private lessons). Other than age, we could
not discern any tendencies concerning which families enrolled their child in Turkish MTT. Attend-
ance was not higher (or lower) for Turkey-born vs. Sweden-born children, children with Turkish-
L1 vs. Swedish-L1 parents or children with parents of a particularly high or low level of education.
Neither appeared there to be any link between MTT attendance and which language the parents
considered to be most important (see the section below on beliefs), as only 46% of the children
whose parents regarded Turkish as more important than Swedish attended MTT. Two families
had arranged for extra, private, tuition.

As for trilingual families (e.g. Kurdish/Turkish/Swedish), children are only entitled to receive
MTT in one of their languages, so the family has to choose. Thus, opting for Turkish means opting
out of MTT in another language. Here it is interesting to note that children from Kurdish/Turkish
homes attended Turkish MTT as frequently as children from purely Turkish-speaking homes.

*Language practices at (pre)school*

All children attended institutional childcare (pre-school or school), and school-age children had
previously been to pre-school. Enrolling a child in pre-school from an early age is a conscious par-
ental decision, and could be construed as a deliberate language planning effort, where parents say
yes to early immersion in Swedish for their child. However, it is also a matter of economic resources.
In Sweden, the question is not whether parents can afford childcare, but rather whether they can
afford not to put their child in childcare, as it is difficult for a family to live on one income only.
Beyond a certain period of paid parental leave, most parents cannot afford to stay at home full-
time with their child, and both parents will seek paid employment outside the home. This was
the case for the parents in the present study as well (only 9% were homemakers). Children started
pre-school at 23 months on average (range 12 – 48 mts, with a few late starts (60 – 72 mts) in cases
of recent immigration). Children attended pre-school for a major part of the day, on average for
32 hours per week (range 6 – 48 hrs).

Pre-schools and schools were run in Swedish, though the extent to which monolingual Swedish
or multilingual staff was employed varied considerably. Many pre-schools and schools were located
in low-status urban areas where a multitude of languages were spoken. Whilst the main language of
communication inside the school was Swedish, we observed during our visits that staff members
often did not have native-like proficiency in Swedish. We could also observe staff speaking Turkish
and other languages to their colleagues and/or to the parents during school hours. It is likely then
that such staff also speak Turkish to some of the Turkish-speaking children. Indeed, the parental
questionnaire responses revealed that 26% of the children attended (pre)schools where a member
of staff spoke Turkish with them. Some participants were the only Turkish-speaking child in their
class, whilst others had one or several Turkish-speaking schoolmates. These results indicate that
multilingual practices in school are commonplace. The use of minority languages, including Turk-
ish, appears to be encouraged or at least tolerated on (pre)school premises.

*Parental language beliefs and attitudes*

The questionnaire asked whether the parents had ever felt any anxiety about their child’s language
development and why, and whether they had sought the help of professionals (clinicians) in this
matter. Most families (81%) said they had not felt any anxiety, but 18 parents had been anxious,
because of late onset of speech, pronunciation difficulties, or – and most relevant here – because
of the child’s bilingualism (N = 7). Some of these parents worried about how the child would be
coping with Swedish in (pre)school as the family mainly spoke Turkish at home, whilst one parent
feared that the child’s Turkish language was stagnating. In 13 cases, the child had been to see a speech-language therapist, who generally allayed the parents’ fears.

The family’s language ideology was not targeted explicitly in the questionnaire. However, one question asked the parents which language(s) they considered to be the most important for their child to become proficient in: Swedish, Turkish, both Turkish and Swedish, or Other. Parents had clear opinions on this and hardly ever left this question blank (2%). Some spouses disagreed with each other. A large majority of parents (80%) considered Swedish and Turkish to be equally important. (‘Equally important’ is also the politically correct answer here, coinciding with official Swedish state-level language policy.) These 80% included 8% who considered a third language as important as Swedish and Turkish. The third language was usually Kurdish or another home language, though English (not spoken in the family), useful as a global lingua franca, was also mentioned. A small but considerable group (14%) considered Turkish more important than any other language. Two parents regarded Kurdish or Kurdish and Turkish as more important than Swedish. Only 3% ranked Swedish highest.

It is difficult to discern a clear pattern behind these answers, as for most parents, Swedish and Turkish were equally important. However, trilingualism, and possibly ethnic affiliation, may play a role: Of those parents who ranked Swedish highest, all had other L1s than Turkish. Of those that ranked Turkish highest, all were L1-speakers of Turkish. At the same time, there was no indication that parents who ranked Turkish highest made extra efforts to boost Turkish exposure for their child or carried out more language-fostering activities.

Taken together, nearly all parents (97%) consider it very important that their child becomes proficient in Turkish, usually alongside the majority language Swedish. This explicitly expressed opinion fits quite well with the reported language practices in the preceding sections: The parents value Turkish highly and pass it on to their children.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study has used parental questionnaire data to investigate the language practices of the families of 105 Turkish/Swedish children. Whilst families were diverse concerning parental education, country of birth, native language and ethnic affiliation (e.g. Turkish vs. Kurdish), most parents valued Turkish highly and wanted their children to be good at both Turkish and Swedish.11

In the majority of families, both parents spoke only or mostly Turkish to the child (63%) and to each other (61%), and the majority of children (65%) were reported to speak mostly Turkish to their parents. Yet depending on family constellation (e.g. two Turkey-born Turkish-L1 parents vs. second-generation parents or mixed heritage partners), different trends emerged. For instance, parents who spoke Turkish and Swedish to each other (14%) were nearly always born in Sweden and highly educated. Children who only/mostly spoke Swedish to their parents (12%) all grew up in households where one or both parents had grown up in Sweden. Child-to-parent language use may be indicative of a generational shift of language preference beginning to take place.

In line with earlier studies on other heritage language populations, we found that child–sibling interaction was reported to be in Swedish to a much higher degree than communication involving parents.12 This underscores that the declared wish or language policy of parents (‘let’s only speak Turkish at home’) is not necessarily adhered to in practice and cannot guarantee heritage language maintenance by itself (Bridges and Hoff 2014; Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2018; Pearson 2007).

There was also much variation concerning the extent to which parents were involved in language-fostering activities in the home (joint book reading, storytelling, singing etc.), and outside the home (organised extracurricular activities in Turkish). Whilst some of these language practices may have evolved unconsciously, some were deliberately planned to boost exposure to Turkish and the use of Turkish and/or to establish family traditions and routines linked to joyful use of the home language (Schwartz 2010). To some extent, parental background (such as literacy in Turkish, level of education and trilingualism) appeared to influence the extent of these activities in Turkish.
It should also be noted that professed language beliefs and attitudes did not necessarily coincide with the family strategies followed in language practices with the child (Schwartz 2010). Whilst the large majority of parents in our study (80%) considered it equally important for the child to achieve proficiency in Swedish and Turkish, 14% ranked Turkish highest. These families did, however, not seem to be making any particular efforts to boost exposure to Turkish or create a richer language-learning environment.

We will now revisit the findings in light of the Swedish context these families are situated in. Most parents in Sweden work outside the home, and most children attend institutional childcare (pre-school) from an early age. This was also the case for our participants. The age of onset for the majority language (Swedish) is thus generally early. Many of the Turkish/Swedish children may, with time, develop a higher proficiency and a preference for Swedish over Turkish. At the same time, Sweden’s official language ideology encourages the upkeep of home languages other than Swedish, such as Turkish, and spells out a child’s rights to their home language and to mother tongue tuition, MTT (Language Act 2009; Education Act 2010).

About half of the Turkish/Swedish children (and more for the older children, age 6−7) attended municipal Turkish MTT, even though this extended to only 30−60 min/week. MTT enrolment can be regarded as a deliberate parental language planning effort. Some parents bemoaned the practical setup of MTT (such as inconvenient location, after-school hours, the mix of proficiency levels in one class) or the lack of MTT offerings, especially for preschoolers, which reflects recent municipal MTT budget cuts (Lindström 2016). Hardly any families had arranged for alternative private tuition in Turkish. Here, limited family resources may be a contributing factor, as the socio-economic status of most families (education and occupation) was not that high.

Many children were attending or had been attending a preschool where the use of Turkish and other minority languages was tolerated or openly encouraged. For 26%, there was a Turkish-speaking member of staff who facilitated communication with the children and parents. When (pre)schools support and show respect for the children’s home language in this manner, children’s pride in their language may be bolstered, encouraging minority language maintenance. Future research, for instance, ethnographical studies of (pre)school environments and/or observations of (pre)school language interactions, should investigate these issues further. The supportive circumstances for L1 and L2 development in the current study are worth pointing out from an international perspective, as for other countries, some studies have documented the opposite, namely that teachers or educational authorities are not supportive of the L1 minority language, forbid its use on school premises or advise parents against using it (e.g. Bezcioğlu-Göktolga and Yağmur 2018).

The parents in the present study all wanted their children to be good at both Turkish and Swedish. Most parents valued Turkish highly and expressed an interest in providing input and support to their children in Turkish. This shows a strong heritage language maintenance ideology and a strong bilingualism ideology at the same time. The parents generally had a low level of anxiety concerning their child’s bilingualism. They wanted their child to learn Turkish ‘very well’, and a frequent rationale for this was the belief that if children learn their mother tongue, they can acquire other languages easily too. This belief is reminiscent of Swedish state-level language ideology and appears to be a popularised version of Cummins’ (1979) interdependence hypothesis.

From the present study, we do not know how things will turn out in the long run. Will family language practices change? Will the children, when they get older, continue to develop their Turkish or only their Swedish? Will they continue to speak Turkish? With whom? Who will become a ‘passive bilingual’? Earlier survey studies (Aktürk-Drake 2017, 2018) suggest that in 2006−2008, when the TIES survey data were collected, second-generation ‘ethnic’ Turks in Stockholm were still mostly active users of Turkish when they were 18-to-35-year-old adults. Yet they self-rated their oral and written proficiency in Turkish much lower than their proficiency in Swedish. The participants in the current study are different; whilst predominantly second-generation children, they also include a few first-generation and quite a few third-generation children, and they also include a considerable number of families with a second minority home language besides Turkish,
such as Kurdish. Moreover, since the TIES survey, great strides have been made in communication technology that may affect family language practices. Whilst the participants of the present study were not extensively using video chats to communicate remotely with grandparents, cousins and friends at the time of data collection (2015 – 2017), this is in the process of changing and may encourage and support minority language upkeep.

For the time being, we may conclude that whilst the widespread endogamy in Turkish-heritage families in Sweden (as also evinced in the present study) revitalises and supports transmission of the home language to the next generation, the educational system of Sweden works both against and in favour of such transmission. By force of early and extensive pre-school attendance, children may develop a preference for Swedish over Turkish, and a few children in our data have already done so. At the same time, the dominant language ideology in Sweden professes that bilingualism is valued and that minority language upkeep in the home is important. This is signalled via multilingual teaching staff, mother tongue tuition and the support and encouragement that (pre)school teachers appear to be giving to the use of minority languages such as Turkish.

Notes

1. ‘Heritage language’, ‘minority language’ and ‘home language’ are used as synonyms here.
2. This estimate is based on census data (Statistics Sweden 2017) for country of origin, combining the number of Turkey-born residents (47,060) and the number of Sweden-born residents with Turkey-born parents (49,555). Note that country of origin cannot straightforwardly be equated with language spoken, as there may be residents of Sweden with family roots in Turkey who do not speak Turkish, as well as Turkish-speaking residents whose country of origin, or their parents’ country of origin, is not Turkey.
3. In a study of all 17,800 Turkey-born immigrants and their 18-to-36-year-old Sweden-born descendants in Stockholm County in 2008, Behtoui (2013) reports that 92% of the women, 84% of the men and 98% of their descendants have Swedish citizenship (p. 2157, note 2).
4. According to Aktürk-Drake (2017), in the Stockholm sample of the 2008 TIES survey, 78% of the 145 second-generation Turks had a Turkish-speaking partner.
5. According to the independent KONDA Social Structure Survey September 2006 (based on interviews with ca 50,000 people in Turkey), 76% identify themselves as ethnic Turks, 15.6% identify as ethnic Kurds and 8.3% as belonging to other ethnic groups. The 84.5% consider Turkish to be their mother tongue, 13% state that Kurdish is their mother tongue and 1.5% consider other languages to be their mother tongue (KONDA 2007, 20–23).
6. Random sampling from the national population register was not feasible, as no statistics are kept on whether or not a resident of Sweden speaks Turkish.
7. The relationship between exposure and the children’s performance on various Turkish and Swedish language tasks is investigated elsewhere (e.g. Bohnacker and Karakoç 2020; Bohnacker, Öztekin and Lindgren 2020; Bohnacker et al. 2021; Bohnacker, Lindgren and Öztekin 2021).
8. This low figure could be a matter of sampling. There may well be parents with Turkish roots in Sweden who speak to their child only in Swedish, but the child will then grow up without Turkish. The BiLI-TAS project only included children who could speak at least some Turkish, as our primary aim was to investigate bilingual children’s language skills in both Turkish and Swedish, not to make a survey of all parents with Turkish roots.
9. 9% (9/105) children did not have siblings. There was also 2% missing data.
10. By regularly we mean nearly every day or 1−2 times per week.
11. Parents who were native speakers of an additional language (e.g. Kurdish) tended to point out the value of that language as well.
12. The longitudinal follow-up two years after the original study also showed some unplanned language shifts towards more Swedish in the home for several families, usually driven by sibling interaction and child agency (see Bohnacker under review; Öztekin 2019).
13. In the longitudinal follow-up, (pre)school observations were carried out, and 10 families were interviewed (Bohnacker under review). Interestingly, no parent reported that any teachers or language and health professionals had discouraged them from using Turkish with their child; in fact, the majority had been explicitly recommended to speak Turkish to the child and increase Turkish input in the home.

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ORCID

Ute Bohnacker http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6715-7470

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